

SMART COLLABORATION

At the Grassroots Level

Emerging Lessons from Detroit's
Community Connections Program

June 2014



Touchstone Center
For Collaborative Inquiry

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This inquiry was made possible by support from the Skillman Foundation and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

Acknowledgements

We thank the grassroots leaders in Detroit whose experiences in collaborative practice over the past eight years inspired and fueled this report. They joined this inquiry in a spirit of honest reflection and continuous learning, exploring their motivations, strategies, struggles, rewards and lessons with us and with each other. We salute their courage, their creativity, and their passion for excellence.

In addition, we acknowledge Lisa Leverette's vital role as program manager for Community Connections since its founding in 2006. Far more than a grantmaker, she has been a mentor and trusted companion to these grassroots groups and leaders: coaching them through many of the challenges in their collaborations, guiding them toward healthy and productive partnerships, bringing them together for peer learning and mutual support, and encouraging them to stretch and grow.

Prevention Network has provided invaluable administrative support to Community Connections. It has shared its expertise from decades of running small grants programs all across Michigan, and shown flexibility and willingness to learn in response to the special opportunities and challenges present in this particular program focused on community change in six Detroit neighborhoods.

Finally, we give special thanks to Marie Colombo, Director of Evaluation and Learning for the Skillman Foundation. She has been a champion of this learning-oriented evaluation project, and for building evaluation capacity and a vibrant culture of learning within the Community Connections program. She also has a passion for sharing lessons locally and nationally among diverse stakeholders; she is truly a field-builder. We appreciate her vision and her support.

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June 2014*

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Executive Summary

In 2013, the Community Connections resident grants program in Detroit conducted a collaborative inquiry into the topic of smart collaboration among grassroots groups and others working for youth development and community improvement. The inquiry probed the experience and perspectives of 13 Community Connections grantee groups known for effective and strategic collaboration. Leaders of these groups were interviewed and engaged in reflective circle conversations, and project reports and other documents from these groups were reviewed. The inquiry team included four current or former members of the Community Connections Changemakers leadership panel plus three consultants. It was guided by Touchstone Center for Collaborative Inquiry, the program's learning and evaluation partner.¹ Learnings from this inquiry are intended primarily for grassroots leaders who want to become more effective collaborators. They also may be useful to larger organizations that want to collaborate with grassroots organizations, and to funders, policy makers and intermediaries that want to promote improved collaboration with grassroots groups.

Why collaborate? Rewards and tensions

Grassroots organizations such as those supported by Community Connections tend to be smaller, newer and less formalized than mainstream nonprofit service agencies. Often they are led by people who work for little or no salary, but who are passionate about youth in their community. They tend to be highly skilled at connecting with people and often have large networks of children and youth who know and trust them.

These grassroots leaders are aware of the potential rewards of collaboration: it's a way to team with others' resources to enable bigger impact; it can expand vision, spark creativity, and generate new opportunities; it's a good way to learn; it offers the companionship of colleagues. However, collaboration takes time and effort, and skills in communication and negotiation. It can obscure the visibility and identity of one's own organization. Sharing one's assets with others involves risk and vulnerability. Collaborating with a larger organization involves a power imbalance that can be dangerous, especially if the larger organization doesn't fully respect the smaller one. And a smaller organization has less cushion for expending effort on a risky or low-yield collaboration.

Getting started

- **Spotting possible partners:** Be clear about who you are and what you want. Clarity about your own mission, values, strengths, gaps and style helps for recognizing when other people or organizations could be valuable partners. Prospective partners can be spotted anywhere; network widely and be alert to surprising possibilities.
- **Attracting invitations:** As you build a track record of competence, others may ask you to collaborate with them. A particularly successful project or program, and longevity, are

¹Funding was provided by the Skillman Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, primary funders of Community Connections which is a program operated since 2006 by Prevention Network.

especially attractive. Be wary, though, of contacts [suitors] who are mainly interested in your funder relationships or your community relationships.

- **Screening prospective partners:** Good partners are honest and transparent. They keep their word. They are willing to listen, to learn, to ask questions. They take an interest in your work and your ideas, and are willing to co-create with you. Their goals, values and mission align with yours – and their strengths complement yours. Prospective partners can be screened by observing whether they show up, and how they behave, at community events. Do they pitch in? Do they interact well with diverse people? Asking one's participating children, families, and staff for their opinions about potential partners is another good way to screen them.
- **Valuable early steps:** Once you have established shared values and interests, communicating to figure out goals and roles is important. These collaborators generally favor starting small, getting to know one another and building trust through modest, informal joint efforts, before tackling larger projects that involve more resources, risk and responsibility. In larger collaborative projects, putting goals and roles in writing – who'll do what, by when, and how money and other resources will be shared -- minimizes confusion and increases accountability.

Tips for smart collaboration

- **Tap partners' strengths:** Ask people and organizations to do what they're good at, to contribute what comes easily for them.
- **Offer safety:** A climate of mutual respect and kindness helps everyone feels free to voice their ideas, offer unusual contributions, and stretch beyond their comfort zones.
- **Build trust:** Trust is essential, and must be earned through trustworthy performance and good-faith communication over time. Demonstrating a commitment to help partners succeed will accelerate the growth of trust.
- **Make it mutually rewarding:** It's important to be attentive and make sure each partner is getting what it needs from the collaboration. Mutual benefit is more common when partners think together and share in decision making.
- **Communicate, and evaluate:** Ongoing, active communication – including active listening -- is the lifeblood of successful collaboration. Meeting or touching base every few weeks is helpful. Evaluating the collaborative project every few months is also a good practice.
- **Build on success:** When a collaboration goes well, it's ripe for continuation, expansion, or for spinoff ventures. Start small, and build on what works!
- **Share the money fairly:** Collaborative funds must be managed honestly and disbursed promptly. A common frustration among grassroots leaders is when larger, better-funded organizations ask them to collaborate but don't share funding for the joint project fairly.

- *Stay mission-centered and focused on the community:* A shared commitment to community benefit helps to build unity and reduce friction. Respect for each organization's mission helps ensure that the collaboration is worthwhile for each collaborator.

Collaborating with different sectors

- ***With youth and residents:*** Creating spaces where youth and residents can develop and act on their ideas together with others helps draw people into meaningful collaboration. Residents are often highly motivated to act because neighborhood problems or goals affect them directly. Youth and residents also get involved and stay involved when collaboration offers meaningful personal relationships, a sense of belonging, and opportunity to learn and grow over time.
- ***With large organizations:*** Larger organizations can provide valuable resources, but also present challenges. Community centers, libraries, schools, houses of worship, businesses and agencies can provide facilities and transportation for grassroots projects and programs. They may have expertise on child development, parenting and other topics relevant to good program design. They may have skills at marketing and publicity, and access to a wide range of resources and resource people.

However, larger organizations may be stuck in a service provider, charity or professional mindset that disrespects the abilities of residents and grassroots groups. Grassroots leaders that are highly skilled at connecting with residents, and that have developed strong networks among local children and families, often feel that professional agencies don't want to learn from them or follow their practices. Instead, the agencies simply want to access their families so they can deliver their own, professional programs to them – and thus justify keeping their funding streams rather than sharing those resources with the grassroots groups.

Tensions between larger organizations and grassroots ones may be as basic as a willingness to meet in the evening when grassroots leaders are more often available, instead of during weekday professional working hours. There's also the frustration of bureaucratic procedures, forms and ponderous decision-making. If a larger, better-funded organization claims credit for a grassroots partner's contribution, tensions will be especially raw. Along with these challenges are the pressures and insecurities that grassroots leaders may feel inside if they have fewer professional credentials, fewer resources at their command, and if they are already stretched thin.

Collaboration goes best when both partners demonstrate equal flexibility, respect and mutual supportiveness.

- ***With government:*** Engaging public agencies makes sense when they have some responsibility regarding a neighborhood concern or goal. They can mobilize key resources, and may be responsive to public or political pressure, which grassroots groups can wield when necessary. However, navigating the complexity and bureaucracy in large government systems is a challenge. And when agencies are in flux due to budget cuts, political change or systems redesign, as has often been the case in Detroit in recent years, collaborating with them becomes more difficult. As with other sectors, successful collaboration typically starts

by building a relationship of trust and mutual regard with one or more staff persons. Knowledge of government legal responsibilities and authority is helpful for shaping collaboration; so is understanding political and media pressure points, when necessary. When government resources are stretched thin and public agencies are under stress, grassroots groups can win allies by showing a willingness to creatively collaborate with public employees on local solutions rather than simply demanding government service.

- ***With businesses:*** For-profit businesses are less common as collaborators with grassroots organizations, but these grassroots leaders urged not overlooking them. Hiring local contractors, caterers and other businesses for needed goods and services helps strengthen the local economy. Local firms will often work for a discount or even for free when they share the goals of the grassroots group. They may encourage employees to volunteer, or make specialized equipment available for local events and projects. Retail businesses such as restaurants and gas stations may be especially willing to collaborate in hopes that their good will may lead to more customer traffic for them.

The key to enlisting businesses as collaborators is to ask them: get to know them, find out what they care about and what they might offer, and then invite them to collaborate.

- ***With faith-based groups:*** Many faith-based organizations believe in helping their neighbors and strangers, and so become willing collaborators. They often have buildings, recreational facilities and vans they can share. Their members may be ready volunteers, and can contribute a wide range of talents. Religious organizations also can wield moral and political clout, adding visibility and legitimacy to grassroots partners. Two tips these grassroots leaders offered were (a) to beware of religious collaborators that are more interested in making themselves feel good as helpers and givers than in treating residents with respect and mutuality – they may prefer to do to rather than with the community; and (b) to approach women pastors as especially likely collaborators on safety and crime prevention, since they have found them often more sensitive than male pastors to these concerns.
- ***The role of funders:*** Funders that encourage larger organizations to collaborate respectfully with small, grassroots organizations play a valuable role in expanding smart collaboration. However, sometimes funders succumb to the same flawed thinking that discounts the contributions of informal groups and leaders to youth development and neighborhood quality of life. Funders should be careful not to perpetuate resource disparities between large and small organizations by assuming the small groups will work or collaborate for little or no funding while awarding much larger grants to larger, professional nonprofits. Smaller organizations that perform at a high level are worth supporting with more resources. Providing better funding pathways and ladders so that effective grassroots groups can grow the scale of their work if they aspire to that is a wise strategy for funders.

Introduction: Learning through collaborative inquiry

As part of its commitment to ongoing learning and evaluation, the Community Connections resident grants program in Detroit launched an in-depth collaborative inquiry in 2013. The inquiry probed a topic of strategic importance to the Community Connections program, as selected by the program's Changemakers leadership panel at their retreat in December 2012: smart collaboration among groups and organizations at the grassroots level.

Collaboration is one of three elements that grassroots grantees are encouraged to include in their projects for greatest impact, along with youth involvement/development (helping youth develop by engaging them as shapers and leaders of community projects), and community action (organizing youth and adults to act together on common problems), according to the program's 2011 evaluation. The program's grant guidelines state that "collaboration means working together with other individuals, groups or organizations to achieve a common goal...strong collaborations help build networks that make communities strong."

Distinctive challenges in grassroots collaboration

This inquiry was undertaken to help grassroots collaboration become better understood and thus more widely, and more wisely, practiced. This report is written especially for grassroots leaders. We also hope it will be useful for larger organizations that might want to partner with grassroots groups, and for policy makers, intermediaries and funders that want to promote effective collaboration with grassroots groups.

Collaboration with and among grassroots organizations differs in some ways from that among larger, more established organizations. The grassroots groups that Community Connections assists tend to be smaller, newer, and less formalized than mainstream service agencies. They may not be incorporated; they may operate out of someone's house, garage, or place of worship. Very often they are run by people who are not paid, or who receive very little salary, for the work they do. They do this work because it is their passion, not their paycheck; a calling, more than a career.

The people active in these grassroots organizations may have academic training in youth development and nonprofit management. More importantly, they have learned in the school of life: from service in Scouting and church youth groups; from parenting their own children and holding their families together; from military service, blue collar and white collar jobs of many kinds. They tend to be highly skilled in connecting with people, and often have large networks of children and families that know and trust them.

Many of them, before they got involved with Community Connections, had little or no experience in the world of grants, foundations, and government funding programs. But they have acted on their passion for kids and for community. They may have more ego invested in their community work; they may simply be deeply rooted in their community with friends and

values that encourage them to act on what they care about. Operating with little professional status and on shoestring budgets, the psychic, social and spiritual rewards in this work are important to them.

From this perspective, the prospect of collaborating with other groups or organizations takes on a different aspect. While they appreciate the resources that more affluent organizations can bring, grassroots groups are aware of the power imbalance they typically face in these collaborations. They can be impatient or scornful of organizations that have book smarts but not street smarts, which are reluctant to meet on weekends or evenings, whose staff and board members don't look like the residents they claim to serve.

When these small, informal organizations consider collaborating with other grassroots organizations, they may not face the same power imbalance nor cultural divide as with professional service providers. But they face risks over identity, credibility, and turf. The commercial culture in our society tells these grassroots groups that to get ahead, they should market and protect their "brand." In collaborative work, identities can blur. Credit, and blame, must be shared.

In both cases, grassroots organizations have scant time available for building collaborative relationships. Their leaders typically want to focus on children and families – not on meeting with other organizations. Since few people are being paid for their work, there's less time available for interagency relations.

Despite these substantial tensions, many Community Connections groups do collaborate, widely and strategically. They see the potential rewards, and they are skilled at navigating the pitfalls and quagmires. This report shares what more than a dozen experienced grassroots collaborators have to say about why and how to collaborate effectively, and how to minimize the dangers and frustrations involved.

Inquiry methods

The approach of this inquiry is to probe the experience of Community Connections practitioners themselves, to surface and harvest their lessons for effective collaboration. Guided by the program's learning and evaluation partner, the Touchstone Center for Collaborative Inquiry, this learning project used the following methods:

- Identify grantee projects that are best examples of the theme
- Study reports, applications and other documents from these projects
- Interview leaders in these projects, individually and in reflective circle conversations
- Generate a report pulling together the key learnings from the inquiry
- Use the lessons with the Community Connections Changemakers panel, to strengthen panelists' work: as ambassadors promoting good projects in the community, as reviewers considering applications to fund, and as champions for effective resident-led community work
- Share and discuss inquiry learnings with other stakeholders and audiences

An inquiry team formed that included three consultants from the Touchstone team, three Changemaker panelists, and a new Community Connections staff member who was formerly on the Changemaker panel.

Thirteen groups were identified by the Community Connections coordinator as good examples of smart collaborators. These are experienced small organizations that have received an average of three Community Connections small grants since 2008 to support their work. After reviewing documents from each organization, a leader of each organization was interviewed.

Interviews occurred in April and May 2013. Most were done in person, with a few conducted by telephone. Ten interviews were conducted by a Touchstone consultant, and three by the new Community Connections staff member who was trained in interview methodology by Touchstone. In about half of the interviews, one or more of the Changemaker panelists on the inquiry team also listened in and participated as appropriate. In addition, two reflective circle conversations, involving a total 13 Community Connections leaders and staff, were facilitated by Touchstone. Interviews and reflective circles were guided by a framework drafted by Touchstone and refined by the inquiry team. This tool, and a list of interviewees and circle participants, can be found in the appendix.



Dawn Wilson is a panelist on the Community Changemakers.

Why collaborate?

Collaboration usually starts with someone I know. I see ways that their ideas and mine together could make something better or bigger. How can we collaborate to be mutually beneficial? -- *Halima Cassells*

Collaboration can be valuable to grassroots groups as a strategy for achieving more than they could on their own. Partly, this is a matter of attracting resources that can help them carry out their vision. “For us, partnership is important because we don’t have a [large] operational budget,” says Phillis Hicks-Judkins of Northend Neighborhood Patrol. “We look for partners who can bring resources.” Erik Howard of Young Nation agrees. “We acknowledge that we have limited resources, and that’s OK if we also can fill our needs with partnerships.”

Collaborating can also expand vision and lead to new opportunities. “When organizations figure out how they can change the community together, both groups can have greater success,” notes Lisa Johanon of Central Detroit Christian Community Development Corporation.

“It’s always good to have more hands and minds on deck,” says Halima Cassells of Detroit Mural Factory Gardens. “It results in more resources and connections to other people and organizations.” Reflecting on one multi-partner collaboration, she said, “[It] was valuable because it created a much richer experience for the students than any one of the organizations could have provided alone. Everybody brought something different to the table.” The collaboration also led to a valuable invitation for her organization, to be part of the Detroit Future Network, which brings youth from all over the city together.

The creativity that can be generated through collaborative relationships is critically important in a city like Detroit, according to Howard. “Detroit is a city of broken systems. We have less police and city services – those gaps can be filled with creativity, using grassroots organizing in ways that promote community. There are a lot of these kinds of gaps in the system, just no one taking the time or having the resources to think a little further ahead or think creatively together.” His network seeks to create the conditions where creative collaboration can emerge. “We seek to fill an empty space, figuratively and literally. We build relationships that aren’t likely, relationships that wouldn’t happen normally... [We offer] a place for people to view and create together.

For Howard, collaborative creativity emerges from long-term, dynamic relationships. “We don’t want a lot of growth for the sake of growth – that’s not sustainable,” he says. “We are much more interested in helping develop these unlikely relationships, maybe a few at a time, that will last – and those relationships will grow. So [an idea might] seem like it’s hard to get off the

A collaboration between the Black Mothers Breastfeeding Association (BMBFA) and a city recreation center became a win-win-win for the association, the center, and the mothers involved. The association first approached the center, when they wanted to organize a breastfeeding club in their neighborhood. They were looking for a venue that was open in the evenings and well known in the community.

The rec center and the breastfeeding association were “strange bedfellows” in that one was a large institution focused on recreation, while the other was small and focused on education and support for mothers and children. However, both were concerned about health, and in this way they were a good fit.

The breastfeeding club provided a resource for the center to send its participants to, and the center provided the club meeting space at no charge. An added benefit was that many of the moms started using the rec center once they started attending breastfeeding club meetings.

ground initially, but it is in that finding out who you are and what we might do together that we create the groundwork for making this new venture really last for the people involved. It won’t be a one-time thing – we may try something and maybe it will or won’t work, but we will be committed to finding a way to make something else work given the time and talents we can bring together. You have to have that relationship that says we are committed to being in this together, and develop what that means – not necessarily expand, but try to work this out.”

Collaboration can also be a good strategy for learning, which may be especially valuable for smaller, younger organizations. Kiddada Green of the Black Mothers Breastfeeding Association encourages grassroots groups to work with an organization that has more experience, so that “you can get some of their ideas.” Not only can partnering with another organization protect against a small group overworking itself and falling into exhaustion, but collaborating with another organization with more experience can decrease the learning curve by providing needed guidance and support.

Patricia Dockery of Stafford House believes groups should ask for “not only material resources, but learning resources. There is so much we still don’t know. We are always learning or looking for ways to do things differently, better. There’s no shame in asking for what you need or what you need to know.”

Collaboration also helps build community. “I think it’s valuable to collaborate across ages and ethnicities as well as among organizations,” says Mary Luevanos, who has been active in southwest Detroit for many years. “Intergenerational collaboration creates peace in the neighborhood.”

How collaboration starts

Collaboration starts when you meet people and find out where you can support them. When you have a vision for possible collaboration, the next step is to reach out to them. Reach out to those who have the same goals and direction: see what I can do for you to help your project or vision. It is not always about my project but to support their ideas as well. – *Phillis Hicks Judkins*

Collaboration can start when one is open to possibility

Opportunities for satisfying collaboration tend to arise when one is curious, flexible, and alert to possibilities, while also firmly rooted in one's own mission and values, according to these smart collaborators. "Each time you go to a meeting, you meet people and get ideas," says Phillis Hicks Judkins. "There are a lot of possibilities." One of the strengths of her group is that they have some members with good ideas to make each opportunity grow.

Jerry Ann Hebron believes in networking among people from diverse fields and backgrounds to get ideas and discover possibilities. "I'm a former realtor. I learned to build relationships," she says. "You have to build relationships, and network to see what other people are doing. As a realtor, I built relationships with people in the banking industry, mortgage industry, housing inspectors. Now I build them with farmers, markets, funders, other gardens" – anyone that might be able to contribute to North End Christian CDC's focus on urban agriculture as a strategy for jobs, economic development and youth development. "I have a relationship with someone who cuts trees, who provides free woodchips. We're a cluster leader for a compost network. My team will help elderly or frail people spread their chips. We share tools, seeds, transplants. It's all about the leverage. I'm always on the lookout for resources."

Hebron is adept at seeing possible connections between diverse players and niches in a system. When her group decided in 2011 to expand from a community garden to a market garden and farmers market, they enlisted a diverse array of partners:

- nonprofits focused on green space and the environment (Sierra Club and Greening of Detroit);
- for-profit people with food cooking expertise (a restaurant chef);
- faith-based, public and nonprofit organizations looking for meaningful service opportunities (a youth mission service group from Grand Rapids, some "sentenced to

serve” programs, and outdoors AmeriCorps volunteers from Vanguard Community Development Corporation);

- outlets for their community produce (a seniors’ housing complex in the neighborhood);
- other growers and artisans who saw the new farmers market as an opportunity for them to sell their goods – thereby expanding the products available and drawing more customers to the market (and she reached both into black farmer networks concentrated in Detroit, and statewide organic grower networks);
- training resources (both statewide and in the metro region);
- nonprofit and for-profit marketing and publicity resources (Fair Food Network/ Double Up Food Bucks, Eastern Market, and the foundations supporting Eastern Markets community partnership program)



Kids play with a calculator at Developing KIDS.

Conja Wright, a librarian at the Redford branch public library, also networks widely while staying clear about the kinds of possibilities she’s looking for. “I am always on the lookout for people with special and unique talents,” she says. “I am a people person. I talk to people all the time, and I am willing to collaborate with anyone that wants to create better environments for children.”

Wright uses an asset-oriented approach when striking up conversations with people: “I often ask people what they do and would they like to teach children how to do it.”

Collaboration can start when leaders go looking for partners that can help them achieve their goals. Kim Newberry of Developing Kingdoms in Different Stages (Developing KIDS) begins by surveying the parents and families involved in her current activities: what do you want to do? Then she looks at the people she’s connected with through her various networking activities, to figure out who among them might bring the resources or expertise necessary to carry out her families’ interests.

Sometimes enlisting a partner organization can take a while, particularly when an organization is trying something new and hasn’t demonstrated its own capacity. “Don’t be disappointed when things don’t happen the way you want them to happen,” says Jerry Ann Hebron. When her organization decided to organize a neighborhood farmers market in 2011, they reached out to Eastern Market. They hoped to become one of Eastern’s community affiliates, knowing the wealth of resources and expertise that would give them access to. However, Eastern didn’t respond. “What I didn’t know was that they were watching us that year – and in 2012 they reached out to us.”

Demonstrating effectiveness can lead to partnership invitations

As a grassroots organization demonstrates its ability to attract youth and families and conduct quality projects and programs, other organizations may start approaching it with offers to collaborate. Most of the smart collaborators interviewed in this inquiry have had this experience. Central Detroit Christian CDC is one that has attracted many invitations to collaborate in recent years. “It’s been an evolution,” says Lisa Johanon, who has been part of CDC CDC for 18 years. “Demonstrating longevity is part of it. Also, having one project that’s widely viewed as a success. In our case, that’s been the Peaches ‘n’ Greens mobile food truck. The mayor, governor, and First Lady Michelle Obama all came to see us in 2009 because of that. No money came directly from that, but our visibility went way up.”

Stafford House, too, has earned a reputation as a capable organization. “Now we get called all the time, being asked to partner,” says Patricia Dockery. “We get more invitations than we can handle. We have to choose which partnership opportunities make the most sense for us.”

Partnership opportunities can be stressful. “We’re all so busy, more invitations to consider collaborating sometimes overwhelm me,” admits Mary Luevanos.

Successfully getting a Community Connections grant and then carrying out the grant project effectively is one way a small organization can earn credibility and become more attractive to prospective partners.

However, Kiddada Green wishes that larger organizations seeking partners would look more closely at performance on the ground and not just at what partners a group has already attracted. “You don’t have to wait until another agency says an organization is credible to partner with them,” she says. “The credibility should always first come from the people being serviced.”

Screening potential collaborators: signs of a good partner

Whether scouting for partners or being courted to collaborate, it’s valuable to know how to assess prospective partners. These grassroots collaborators have many suggestions for what to look for. Resources and skills are important, of course – but other qualities also matter.

“Start with people that you know with a high level of integrity,” advises Halima Cassells.

“I look for partners that are honest and transparent,” agrees Riet Shumack of Brightmoor Youth Gardens and Neighbors Building Brightmoor. “You must know their working style. Each partner needs to be transparent with each other.”

“I want to make sure partners will deliver, because a partner that is unsuccessful reflects badly on the whole partnership,” says Kim Newberry. “I look for partners that will show up each time, not just want their name on an event without being engaged.”

Lisa Luevanos, of the Community of Latino Artists, Visionaries and Educators (CLAVE), looks for partners who are flexible and resourceful, stepping in to do what’s needed. She has found the

"You must listen carefully and evaluate: what is your mission? What are you trying to do? Does this advance that? All money is not good money," warns Jerry Hebron of North End Christian CDC. "You have to be careful that your mission doesn't get lost by working someone else's mission."

Jerry partners with others who "really believe in what we are doing," and has walked away from some funded partnership opportunities because she perceived the prospective partners did not really believe in what her organization was doing. For example, two organizations invited NEC CDC to collaborate with them. One was focused on involving youth in housing renovation, the other focused on working with homeless people on housing renovation, deconstruction, and a food pantry. The organizations offered to share funding with NEC CDC to join them in working on housing and deconstruction and to expand from a focus on youth to also work with homeless people.

"I always had to tell them, 'We're going to stay in our lane.' Our lane is urban ag, urban ag to create jobs and economic development, and we work with young kids, 5-12. We didn't want to get into housing and deconstruction, or working with those other populations, like they did. They waved these dollars, but that's not always the best choice for us."

nonprofit group that cares for Clark Park in southwest Detroit to be that kind of a partner. When they held a community art day in the park, Clark Park volunteers and staff "were really helpful at everything besides the art-making" which Lisa led.

Conja Wright screens partners for their willingness to learn and to co-create. "Good partners are people that know they don't know it all and are willing to listen. They are not afraid to ask questions," she says.

An important aspect of that curiosity, according to Shumack, is the desire to learn from partners. "Good partners take an interest in what you are doing." Prospective partners should be purposeful and intentional about seeking each other's ideas before putting anything into action, she advises.

Clear communication is important, as well – on all sides. "In order to have a valuable collaboration, you also have to tell others what you need and want, and you need to be clear on their wants and needs," says Wright.

Shared goals are essential for effective collaboration. "If the goals are similar, then we don't feel that we have to compete against each other," says Aswan Almakhtary of the JIRAN youth organizing project at ACCESS.

Several leaders emphasize looking deeper than goals for values and mission alignment. "Don't partner with people if you don't know what their mission is," advises Shumack.

"When looking for partners you must find like-minded people, that have your same level of commitment," says Gwen Britt of Education One. Describing a satisfying collaboration with a woman who provided space for Britt to lead a writers' workshop, she says, "We worked very well together. Everything that I needed was always available...we were peas in a pod. She was very in tune with the needs of the children. We both were very passionate about uplifting the children in our community."

Erik Howard says, "We look at the 'collaborative DNA of other organizations by looking at their underlying values, not their commitment to collaboration. We look to see: do they have a



Kim Newberry speaks to a crowd of residents at a community event at Don Bosco Hall.

culture that supports engagement and collaboration? Not ‘do they collaborate?’ Some organizations, especially big ones, only collaborate because funders insist on it.” That’s not the kind of partner Young Nation wants. While discerning a potential partner’s organizational culture is important, most of those interviewed start by getting to know the key people involved. “It is hard to have a relationship with an organization – you have to build that trust with people,” Howard says.

A common way to screen for partners’ core values is to observe them at community events. “Good partners can be found at community events because they are involved with the community,” says Britt.

Kim Newberry adds, “If I hear of a program but never see them at community events, or hear about them from residents of the community, I usually won’t partner with them.” She pays attention not only to whether they show up at community events, but to how they conduct themselves: “How do they contribute? Do they pitch in at whatever needs doing? Do they display certain valuable talents? What can be seen of their attitude and people skills: how do they come across to those we serve?”

In addition to observing prospective partners at community events, Newberry assesses them by asking her staff, participating families and kids about what organizations they are aware of and their programs, to get their opinions. Children, in particular, give unvarnished replies, she finds. Within her organization, there are many forms of focus groups to allow everyone to give input. Some of her most valued collaborators have come through suggestions by other Developing KIDS’ staff. One of these is Ambassadors Counselling LLC, which has worked with Developing KIDS since 2010 leading grief-loss-trauma groups. Kim appreciates them because they work at a

discounted rate, offer long group sessions, and act as a supportive partner in other ways such as helping at other Developing KIDS' events and even contributing funds.

Once goals and values align, prospective partners' skill sets are important. Britt puts a priority on partners that can focus and follow through. In her view, strong partners "have excellent time management skills, they are well organized, and they don't have their hands in too many pots."

When values and vision are compatible, partners with different yet complementary missions can be especially valuable, according to Halima Cassells. "If you can see a connection, but not necessarily doing the same work...but you have a symbiotic connection, then both groups stand to gain from collaboration."

Valuable early steps

With a new partner, it is wise to talk before walking, and to walk before trying to run – in other words, make sure there is mutual understanding and clarity regarding the goals and roles of the collaboration; and start small and build from there.

"If goals are not spelled out, misunderstandings are going to arise," warns Britt. Lisa Johanon agrees, saying she has learned that "everyone doesn't think the same way." Groups should make sure that "agendas are clearly outlined before they start." While motives can be pure, all parties should be clear on expectation and agree on the direction of the project.

Conversation about mutual interests and concerns is a good way to start a relationship, but developing an action plan together is also important, according to Patricia Dockery. "Too often we attend meetings where people have a nice conversation and a meal, but people don't understand why they are there. What are we doing together? We need a plan. What are the steps, and tools you need? Who do you need to involve? Having the conversation about who is going to do what – that's hard, that takes negotiation, honesty, understanding, and taking responsibility."

To reach this kind of up-front clarity, before Black Mothers Breastfeeding Association formalized its partnership with Lipke Recreation Center, Kiddada Green held two meetings and two phone calls with the center director. She also made sure that staff at the center's front desk knew about the collaboration, so that they could direct people to the breastfeeding club's meeting space and share information about the club with guests of the center.

Above all, Green advises, stay mission-driven when considering or starting partnerships with other groups. "If it's not going to help drive your mission forward, you have to be careful." When all partners are clear about expectations, it helps keep the collaboration mission-driven and prevents many potential problems or tensions.

Making sure that a partner is committed to the common cause and not just to the possibility of accessing funds through collaboration is crucial. As Lisa Johanon says, collaboration must "go deeper than the money." It must be compatible with each partner's vision and mission. With a

new partner, Kim Newberry prefers to work together on something informal and un-funded before entering the higher-stakes world of shared-funding projects.

Put it in writing?

While some leaders interviewed like to let collaboration develop informally as relationships grow deeper, others believe it is valuable to put goals and roles in writing. This will “make sure everyone involved has an understanding of what is expected of them,” says Britt.

When money is involved, Kim Newberry insists on creating a written memorandum of understanding (MOU) defining who is responsible for what, by when. Even without funding in the partnership, Newberry recommends creating a task list that spells out who will do what, by when. Establishing this level of role and task clarity protects against two dangers: (a) a partner dropping its ball, and (b) a partner overreaching its role, disregarding what other partners had wanted to contribute.



Aswan Almaktary

Tips for smart collaboration

Never expect things to be perfect, because they won't be. And learn to relax!

– *Gwen Britt*

The experienced grassroots collaborators interviewed offered several suggestions for helping collaboration be as rewarding as possible:

- Make it easy by tapping strengths and offering safety
- Build trust
- Make it mutually rewarding
- Communicate regularly, and periodically evaluate
- Build on success
- Share the money fairly
- Stay mission-centered and focused on the community

Make it easy: tap partners' strengths, offer safety

"We find that people are pretty willing to share their resources if there is a way to do it easily," says Patricia Dockery. She adds, "Sometimes they don't realize how much of a resource they have until you ask. Like the pro baseball players' teams -- yes, they want to help out and spend some time with youth, but they don't know how to do it or who to do it with. Youth development is not their thing. But they are more than happy to show up if you create an easy way for them to give their time. They are a valuable resource, but it takes time to develop this resource and that relationship."

Young Nation concentrates on establishing a climate of safety so that "unlikely relationships" can flourish, according to Erik Howard. "Our Alley Project has a participatory design process. Its outer circle is a design advisory group, with diverse interests. We have developed a strong, safe place of overlap at the center."

Build trust

Trust is a major reason why collaboration works or fails. Building trust takes time, and must be earned through trustworthy performance and quality communications over time. Collaborating is a "game of risks," observes Lisa Johanon. "We've been in one collaboration for seven years now. It took us until year 2 or 3 to build trust and to know that our partners had our backs," says

Lisa Johanon.

To build trust, says Phillis Hicks Judkins, “My main thing is keeping your word with the people you work with,” even if it has to come out of your own pocket sometimes. To guard against this risk, she advises, “Don’t promise more than you can do. You have to get involved, but you can’t be part of everything and promise everything... so you have to make sure you do what you say.

Make it mutually rewarding

“I want to know what it will take to keep us working together,” says Judkins. “I’ve been to each church, listen to their message. I want to know what their needs are that will help them be a part of the patrol. It’s not a one-time thing, and it’s OK to have your own interest, you just have to know what is best for everyone.” She also works to keep interactions positive. “If you put out negativity, it will come back at you. If you put out genuine good will, that will come back too.”

“People must recognize the need that every group has, and understand the importance of mutual benefit,” Dockery says. “When I approach people, I say, ‘What are you doing and what do you need?’ It is never about ‘we need you to do this and that,’ it’s about recognizing what they are doing.”

“It must be a give and take, too, not just a take,” adds Jerry Ann Hebron. “Don’t be afraid to share, because that sets you up to receive.” She does not worry about others taking unfair advantage of information she shares. “We have a collaborative spirit. We share ideas. I try to expose my group to everything. We’re not protective that way. I believe that what is for you is for you, and what is for me is for me.” During her earlier career as a court system administrator (she ran three departments with 76 people under her), and in her real estate business on the side, “I never worried about the house that didn’t close, or the promotion I didn’t get. That’s my faith. That’s my belief.”

“The rule is, ‘I’m helping you, you help me,’” says Sheila Jackson-Carter, a Changemaker panelist.

When collaboration helps partners think more deeply, and to participate in making decisions, it is especially valuable, according to Howard. “I think a project is a collaborative effort when the people that the project is for have everything to do with the decision-making of the project and group. The garage that we use was renovated by university design and architect students and is very functional for our needs. The University of Detroit Mercy and the Detroit Design Center were instrumental in getting this space to the level where it is now. Professional designers created physical design interventions. It is a cool place – it was designed through participatory processes. All of the planning included kids, neighbors, some service organizations, and the architect students. They helped us focus on what do we want to do – not what do we need, for example we thought we needed desks or chairs, but they asked what do we want to do – how will we want to use the space now and in the future. This process really helped us to think.”

In contrast, these smart collaborators dislike it when partners exclude them from decision making. “Sometimes collaborations are not really collaborations, they’re one group telling the other groups what to do next and they don’t really involve them in the planning,” says Riet

Shumack. “We collaborated with [one organization] and were not included with the planning of projects. They would bring us plans and wanted us to start working on these plans without asking if we even wanted to do the projects.” That collaboration did not last.

Communicate regularly, and periodically evaluate

Along with upfront clarity about values, goals and expectations, communication must be ongoing and active.

“I would tell grassroots groups to communicate regularly...I believe all people want to do good work but challenges arise when communication is not clear,” says Conja Wright. Kim Newberry generally meets with partners once or twice a month so that everyone stays clear.

Ongoing listening to each other will help make the experience valuable, according to Riet Shumack.

One lesson that Lisa Johanon has taken from her experiences is to regularly evaluate the collaborative project or program, at least quarterly.

Build on success

Collaboration can expand – in depth, or in breadth – when small joint efforts are successful and you learn more about partners’ interests and capabilities. “I like to take the momentum of a successful partnership and expand it from there -- both doing more with that partner and getting more partners,” says Patricia Dockery. For example, with Motor City Allstars, which has a sports program in the North End near Stafford House, she enlisted help for fundraising so their kids could go to Florida for a championship game. Out of that connection, they decided to continue to work together on other activities.

As mentioned earlier, Developing KIDS finds it valuable to start with a new partner on a small or un-funded joint project. If that goes successfully, and partners learn more about each other and build trust through that experience, it creates momentum for trying more challenging, larger, funded projects.

Share the money fairly

A common frustration of these grassroots leaders is when collaborators don’t share funds fairly. “I’ve been burned twice when I wasn’t the fiduciary and they’ve taken my money,” says Lisa Johanon. Her worst case occurred seven years ago, when two other organizations invited her organization to collaborate on providing tutoring to Detroit Public Schools (DPS) students. One of the other organizations was the fiduciary, receiving payment from DPS for the three partners’ work. Even though the partners had developed a clear memorandum of understanding, Johanon’s organization wasn’t reimbursed for its share of the tutoring -- ultimately, a \$17,000 shortfall. Johanon says the lessons for her were, in future, not to trust those partners again, and to make sure she knew more about the funder’s payment schedule to the fiduciary so that she would realize sooner if funds were being diverted. Despite this frustration, Johanon is glad that

children received needed tutoring; some of the children are still involved in Central Christian's programs, all these years later.

Developing KIDS is often asked to join in on someone else's event – to contribute ideas to the planning, time and talent to help run the event, and especially to encourage their children and families to attend the event (because Developing KIDS is well-known for its large numbers of involved children and families). However, Kim Newberry says she sometimes finds out that the organization or coalition that invited her has received special funding for the event yet does not intend to share any funds with Developing KIDS. "I say: show me the money if you want me to help you."

Young Nation also has had experience with other organizations obtaining funds based on partnership with Young Nation but not sharing the funds fairly. "There was one group in particular that kept wanting us to partner, so I sent them some info, a pamphlet about our project. Later I found out that they did get that grant, but we didn't see a dollar of it. They misrepresented our level of 'partnership'...They said they were part of creating our work, which was totally untrue. And then when they did get funds, we never heard another word from them."

Stay mission-centered and focused on the community

When collaborators stay centered in their own organizational mission yet pursue a shared vision for their community's well-being and improvement, the odds for success are maximized. As Aswan Almakary says, "When we are working together – it is all about the community. It's not a job, it's a passion."

Riet Shumack adds, "Have a clear, defined mission and stick to it. Otherwise you will lose your focus and become less effective."



A group of residents from the Osborn Neighborhood at the Matrix Center.

Collaborating with different sectors

The keys to effective collaboration vary somewhat depending on the kinds of organizations or people you're working with, according to these grassroots leaders. They offered their insights on smart collaboration with:

- Youth and residents
- Large organizations
- Government
- Businesses
- Faith-based groups
- Funders

Collaborating with youth and residents

"If you want youth to be involved, they have to be part of this from the very beginning," says Aswan Almakary. "We have to pay attention to youth initiatives and actions. It is not us who design the programs. If you want your project to be successful, it has to come from the community. It is always important to include the youth."

Leaders at Stafford House work to create a climate in which youth and adult residents will come together and launch their own initiatives. "We have provided space and support for a few projects that our young men want to start," says Patricia Dockery. "They have a good idea, want to see if a few neighbors can get together to talk about the kids hanging around their area, get some activities going. They just need a little direction, some supplies, a place to get together and share ideas. We can do that -- people need a place where they feel supported to do good things. We connect them to other people who are doing stuff that might be a good partnership. It helps us to help them." Dockery is careful not to claim credit for these collaborative citizen efforts, because she wants to encourage ownership by the youth and adult residents involved. "People say those are our program; no, it's theirs!"

Young Nation also recognizes that youth and residents want to contribute, to belong, and to be creative. "The great thing is that people who haven't gotten into clean ups or haven't volunteered before are coming here -- [they like] having an authentic place to be a part of something," says Erik Howard. "For example, there are a lot of folks interested in cars around here. The youth and some artists have been talking about car detailing -- and we are looking for ways to work with low riders to get some car detailing art and skills together. This is new and exciting for us, because it's art and it's maybe a trade skill if they get the right training."

Collaborating with residents means recognizing and leveraging people's personal relationships more than their professional or institutional affiliations, according to Howard. "Our partners on Avis (street) are important -- these neighbors represent groups of friends/family. They aren't formal, but one neighbor is connected to others that maybe we haven't been connected to yet."

But the way to reach them – yes there's some door knocking involved, but it is much more effective to say, you already know this person, and they won't talk to me, but they might give you feedback that you can bring to the group. That doesn't mean they aren't involved, but they chose their level of involvement through these informal groups of friends and family. Collaborations have to recognize the informal and formal groups – big and small. We all bring something needed."

North End Christian CDC encourages youth and residents to act on their ideas and pursue their own goals in the context of neighborhood activity that the organization facilitates. When some people involved with the Oakland Avenue community garden became interested in selling their produce, the CDC helped them form the Oakland Avenue Community Garden and Greenhouse Cooperative, with 11 members who share the work and the revenues earned. North End Christian launched the Oakland Avenue farmers market in 2011, and some of the kids involved decided in 2012 to open a lemonade stand in the market. This year, those youth also planted a pumpkin patch so they'd have something else to sell at the market especially in the fall when cooler temperatures cause lemonade sales to decline.

Phillis Hicks Judkins appreciates the strong self-interest that residents have in improving their community. "The best collaboration I've had is with the residents themselves," she says. "People are the best collaborators because they have an incentive to be here, to make their neighborhoods better."

To its surprise, Stafford House even collaborated with a drug gang on one occasion. Recognizing the legal and ethical dangers involved in even considering such a prospect, Stafford House was careful to set the terms. "We've had problems with drug houses," says Dockery. "There are dope boys selling drugs, using walkie-talkies. Eventually, a high-level drug guy wanted to talk to me. He wanted to donate to the block party – something 'for the kids.' I asked him to set up chairs and tables. He was shocked but agreed, with his people. Then they patrolled against crime at the block party."

Howard is not surprised to hear this. "It's in the interest of drug dealers for things not to be hot. So they'll patrol," he says.

Working with large organizations

Large organizations can provide valuable resources – but can be challenging to collaborate with.

Many of these grassroots groups partner with larger organizations – community centers, churches, libraries, schools -- as sites for their programs and activities. Larger organizations also sometimes provide transportation for grassroots programs, bringing youth to program and field trip sites.

Sometimes these partnerships extend beyond a space/program match. For example, Black Mothers Breastfeeding Association (BMBFA) has a vibrant relationship with Wayne Children's Healthcare Access Program (WCHAP). WCHAP provides space now for breastfeeding club meetings, and also has invited BMBFA to do informational sessions with their staff and to speak

with some of WCHAP's other partners. "It feels like we've been adopted by WCHAP," says Kiddada Green.

Developing KIDS has a robust relationship with Don Bosco Hall Community Resource Center in the Cody Rouge neighborhood, which provides it with program and office space. The two organizations share a commitment to increasing parent and adult participation at the center and to strengthening youth development work throughout Brightmoor and other neighborhoods. Don Bosco asked Kim Newberry to join a Targeted Area Project team, a Skillman Foundation-funded effort to strengthen youth programming in several neighborhoods, and Newberry eventually was elected chair of the TAP team.

When Developing KIDS organized its own family events, they typically drew about 65 people, Newberry says. When they began doing family events jointly with Don Bosco Hall, participation at the monthly events swelled to 200 or more people. Don Bosco Hall staff were part of the planning team along with Developing KIDS and other Brightmoor organizations, and the Hall contributed funds as well (the group got a \$10,000 grant but drew up a \$40,000 budget so they had extra fundraising to do). When the grant funds ran out, other organizations stopped participating, but Don Bosco Hall and Developing KIDS have continued to collaborate on events.

Developing KIDS has also had satisfying partnerships with a couple of large organizations from outside their neighborhood that wanted to bring programs or resources to Brightmoor residents. The national nonprofit playground organization KaBOOM! contacted Developing KIDS and offered to work with them to create a playground at Don Bosco Hall, using KaBOOM's strategy of involving residents and community stakeholders to help design and install the playground. Developing KIDS coordinated that local process, and the playground was installed in August 2011. Another valuable time-limited collaboration was with Sand Castles, a grief support program for children and families affiliated with Henry Ford Hospital. Sand Castles also initiated contact with Developing KIDS, when they wanted to expand their work into the Brightmoor neighborhood (several Brightmoor schools had referred Sand Castles to Developing KIDS as the go-to organization in Brightmoor on grief, trauma and loss). With guidance and referrals from Developing KIDS, Sand Castles led three groups in the neighborhood – for young children, teens, and adults. The groups ended after a year, when Sand Castles' grant for this ran out.

Eastern Market has been a valuable large organization partner to North End Christian CDC and its Oakland Avenue Farmers Market, offering a wide array of expertise and resources. Eastern publicizes the Oakland Avenue market as one of its community affiliate markets, and prints Oakland Avenue's publicity flyers and postcards. It staffs its own booth at the Oakland Avenue market, offering produce not available from other market booths. And Eastern provides people and equipment for occasional cooking demonstrations, plus a person who leads Zumba aerobics once a month at the market.

Tensions with large organizations

While the benefits from collaborating with large organizations can be considerable, these grassroots collaborators named several challenges they often encounter as well.

Professional attitudes and community realities

Large organizations often seem arrogant both toward neighborhood residents and toward grassroots groups and leaders. “They have functioned so long as service providers it does not come easy for them to empower neighbors,” says Riet Shumack. “They are here to sell you a product, they are not in the business of empowerment. They need to be retrained.”

“The larger groups are not in touch. They understand [issues] from the perspective from middle class and academia, but they don’t get it...They need to connect with people,” says Patricia Dockery. “We are in direct contact with people, face to face. The large organizations are not willing to come out of the ivory tower, and you can’t run a program if you don’t have boots on the ground to understand the people you want to involve. Big groups are more concerned with big bills and jobs for their staff as opposed to boots on the ground.

While grassroots groups could be a valuable resource helping agency professionals get in touch with neighborhood residents and gain understanding into their lives, Dockery says, “Sometimes the big organizations don’t feel like they have anything to learn from us, or they think they know enough about what we do. They think they can partner with us and we can just show up with people. We know folks, we can get them there, but will they stay? If they aren’t coming to your programs, it’s not because of the people, it’s because of you, the organization.”

Dangers in dancing with a much bigger partner

These grassroots collaborators are wary of being exploited by large organizations. “You have to be careful not to get swallowed by large organizations,” says Kim Newberry. “One organization offered to partner with us on our event, and then they marketed it without our name on it! They sold it to the funders as their event.”

“Large organizations often want to tap into the heart of the work of grassroots organizations – our relationships with children and families -- without extending the benefits given to larger partners,” Newberry adds. “Grassroots organizations want to develop and brand their work in official communications as well.”

Along with a willingness to collaborate for community good, organizations must cope with the undercurrent of competition with others doing similar work or serving similar constituencies. Who can attract (and retain) more participants? Which will attract more funding? Where will talented staff and leaders choose to affiliate? When engaging with large organizations, this potential competition may not seem like a fair contest.

Tensions arise from both the asymmetry and the inequality of resources wielded by grassroots groups and larger, professionalized organizations. These grassroots collaborators agree with Lisa Leverette’s observation that “if you have the relationships that bring the people, you are a key partner.” But large organizations don’t always treat them as a key partner, and the grassroots groups are painfully aware of what they lack. “We worry about financial resources, educational resources; we need building space, a place to be,” says Dockery. “Staffing is a problem... Small groups don’t have money to pay staff. People have to put on too many hats, and it makes them ineffective. We are able to get business donations, but most things are done by people, volunteers, who are already barely getting by.”

“If you yoke unequal organizations, too often one becomes the rider and the other becomes the horse,” warns Erik Howard. He is especially wary of large organizations that offer to collaborate because a funder requires it. “They aren’t committed to genuine collaboration,” but they ask for endless meetings to give the appearance of moving toward collaboration.

Sometimes it’s hard to tell if a large organization is uncommitted to true collaboration or if they’re simply slow because they are ponderous and bureaucratic. Either way, Howard advises, “Be strategic – don’t let the big organization keep you from doing what you want to be doing. If you are interested in getting something done on a real time frame, then be careful not to let the process get in the way of the work. You have to watch your own resources, being in partnership with big organizations. They have their own processes that can wear down your resources and purpose. We are small, and bigger organizations have enough resources to keep us in conversation, intentionally or not, without actually doing anything. They can stall us into stagnation, wait us out, and bait us with meeting after meeting.

“When neighbors or grassroots organizations complain about the system, it’s not just the bureaucracy of all talk, no action, it’s that [large organizations] can wait to play the discussion out in endless meetings, all the while drying up our time and resources. Before we know it, the eight week program is over or the year grant period is done, and nothing is changed. Instead, what’s happened is that they were able to divert our attention and resources in this idea of working together, but have just wasted what little resources that we have. You do this enough times and yes, your volunteer resources will give out.

“So we have learned to be strategic about who we partner with and how we grow. We don’t have resources to waste with big organizations who want to control the pace of change.”

Cumbersome bureaucracy

Brightmoor Youth Gardens found a mismatch of organizational style when they collaborated with The Greening of Detroit. “One of the tensions was because they were such a large organization, they were much more structured than we were,” says Riet Shumack. “We were more spontaneous, and it was sometimes difficult to submit to their guidelines.”

This year, the garden resource program broke off from The Greening and started its own organization called Keep Detroit Growing. “As a result, we have moved from a one way street to a mutual, equal partnership,” Shumack says, “because they are much smaller now. They are much more dependent on the smaller groups. We are now in a position to provide leadership and training.”

Librarian Conja Wright experienced similar strains with one of her grassroots collaborators who chafed at following Detroit Public Library purchasing procedures. “It was like two big women in a kitchen and we both wanted to stir the pot...Even though she signed an agreement to adhere to the Friends of the Library protocol, she had a hard time understanding that she needed to give me paperwork in order to receive her supplies. Then, when her program started and she didn’t have all of the supplies, and in her zeal to service her children, she was like a mother tiger: she didn’t want to hear it, she just wanted her stuff!”

Phillis Hicks Judkins has also had bad experiences with bureaucratic partners. “When I start depending on the big folks, the only disappointment I had was depending on someone who does not complete something and it falls on me. They get to me last minute and I have to somehow make it work. It is hard for me to deal with big organizations. They have too many people to go through to get to the one that is responsible when something goes wrong. I have had my feelings crushed because of the people who are depending on me and it gets out of my control.”

Advice to large organizations

“Big organizations are welcome,” says Aswan Almakary. “But they have to join as partners, not as organizations where we have to fit in. You go to the community. You are a part of the community. You don’t make the community fit inside you. When large organizations work with each other, they have to respect each other and uphold the common goals.”

The great equalizer between large organizations and these smaller grassroots groups is that the grassroots groups have extensive relationships with residents. The large organizations “have to work with small groups because they don’t have the relationships,” Almakary says. “They can’t have an impact without the community and community groups.”

“I would tell larger groups to be patient with the smaller groups,” Wright the librarian says. “They need to bring down the walls, because they are working with information that has been generated by themselves, with a lot of prejudices about who people are and what they need.”

“Don’t overpromise,” advises Howard. “As a big organization, you know what you can and can’t do. If you can’t help a small group out, don’t waste their time and resources. If you can, then be upfront about what that means for you and for them.

“Any relationship goes both ways, so it's almost expected that small groups are going to have to jump through some hoops to be part of the game, but you need to be clear up front about what those hoops are,” Howard adds. And large organizations “have to be prepared to go through some hoops to fit into the smaller groups’ processes, too. There may be less hoops, but it may be more difficult for large groups to be flexible...Larger groups have to be willing to stretch as well.”



Aswan Almakary, far right, stands with youth volunteers.

Collaborating with government

When a public agency has some responsibility or authority over a neighborhood interest, engaging the agency as a partner makes sense. The good news in trying to collaborate with government is that government agencies are more responsive to public or political pressure than many other kinds of organizations. However, navigating the complexity and bureaucracy in large government systems is a challenge. And when agencies are in flux due to budget cuts, political change, or systems redesign, partnering with them becomes especially difficult.

One major factor that negatively affected collaboration between Black Mothers Breastfeeding Association and a city recreation center was the instability of city government. BMBFA never knew when the center might permanently close and force BMBFA to meet elsewhere. Worse, the center's staff did not keep the Association in the loop when the city of Detroit began discussions about closing recreation centers across the city. When the city started cutting back, many of the rec centers were closed on certain days, but BMBFA was never informed of schedule reductions. On more than one occasion, breastfeeding club members showed up for meetings as scheduled but found the building closed.

An organization that's been fairly successful in engaging local government as a partner is Stafford House. "With government as with all partners, you must build a relationship," says Patricia Dockery. "Start out by building trust. Emphasize the mutual benefits of working together."

Along with that, Stafford House insists that the City fulfill its responsibilities – and uses pressure tactics when necessary. "With blighted buildings, we contact the City departments who should clean them up. We threaten media attention – the law forbids unsafe wreckage near schools, and the City departments would be embarrassed if the media reported that the City was ignoring unsafe buildings against the law."



Department of Justice representatives attend a community peace event in the Northend neighborhood.

The first time Stafford House decided they wanted to enlist the City to tear down some vacant properties as part of a neighborhood cleanup campaign, Dockery recalls, “I contacted the City with my list and said: tear these down in the next three weeks. The City has a demolition waiting list that’s two years long; I didn’t know that.” But being a squeaky wheel, as broadly and as high in the system as necessary, can lead to some grease. The key to Stafford House’s success that time, she suspects, was that “I sent copies of my correspondence to everyone and their bosses at the City. The City folks later said, ‘We heard it was a White woman from the suburbs who started this and she was going to take everybody down if we didn’t do what she wanted.’”

This combination of honey and vinegar in their relationship with the City has worked well for Stafford House. “Now, every time we do something, the City wants to be part of it.” Of course, the City is not yet a proactive partner. “So far, the City has only torn down the places we’ve demand. We’ve continued to talk. Some buildings will be rehabbed, others are on their list to tear down.”

Phillis Hicks Judkins says the Detroit Police Department also responds to public pressure. That is why she helps them with being a between group, to keep the connection easy between the police and the residents. “The position I am in is very important to the residents. They need our help and we need the help of the police.”

Collaborating with businesses

Local businesses should be recognized as prospective collaborators, according to several of the grassroots leaders interviewed. “We need to use the people in the community to do economic work – keep that money going in our community. We’ve got landscapers, cement guys, contractors, asphalters,” says Mary Luevanos. “Sometimes they work for free on community projects. For example, they asphalted the bandstand stage in Clark Park for us.”

“Whatever business you’re in, you can contribute,” agrees Judkins. “For example, gas stations that are in my patrol area give us coffee or hot drinks when it is cold. Others donate us food. Anything that we ask of them they try to help – help us clean, for example. They send us materials, or send helpers to work with us.

“All you have to do is ask. That’s our problem – we think they’re not going to do anything, so we don’t ask. We can also say: your business is a part of this area and we need your help so that we can help each other and support your business by passing the word on about your kindness which is free advertisement,” Judkins adds.

Erik Howard agrees that local businesses are valuable neighborhood assets and may be receptive to partnership invitations. “They’re healthy and important as neighbors, and they’re often willing to collaborate if asked,” he says. For Young Nation, “La Terraza restaurant has been a great local partner. When kids aren’t hanging out here in The Alley Project, lots are hanging around the restaurant. People who aren’t familiar with southwest Detroit may feel the kids are loitering, but there isn’t a place for them. This is their place, and business owners are part of keeping up these gathering places and keeping an eye on who’s coming around.

“Our Expressions kids introduced me to that place,” Howard says of La Terraza. “I realized they had ambitions, so I invited the owner down to see what we do. We connected him to Urban Neighborhood Initiatives, who started using them for catering. Last October, he came to us and said, ‘We want to open a gallery in our space and name it for you.’ I refused that part! But he’s a business that sees an overlapping value for artists and businesses to support each other.”

Businesses may get involved, and stay involved with neighborhood partners, for similar reasons as active residents: they have a stake in the neighborhood. “Signature Services helped us keep the lot maintained and did some contract work,” says Howard. “Their partnership is not grant-based. They care because they are here, they have relationships with local folks who talk them into giving this or that. That giving might be the way they start, but once they come and are involved, they will come back next time, and probably won’t have to be asked in because they feel it is already theirs, too. They get something out of it.”

Collaborating with faith-based groups

These smart grassroots collaborators recognize faith-based groups as another set of potential allies and partners. Several of these grassroots collaborators are themselves faith-based. “I believe the Lord has a purpose for me and I work to fulfill it,” says Kim Newberry of Developing Kingdoms in Different Stages. “My purpose and my passion guide my decisions in collaboration.”

“Many faith-based groups are willing – they want to help,” says Judkins of Northend Neighborhood Patrol. “Many church members don’t live in our area, but they want to help in our area.”

As with other kinds of organizations, collaboration with faith-based groups can grow from personal relationships. “One church came to me; one of the men who live in our safe house goes to that church,” Judkins says. “They contributed nine men to our patrol.”

Religious partners can be valuable for their moral and political influence, too. “If I can get churches involved in the patrol, then I can challenge Detroit Police Department on this. DPD wants patrol cars; my people mostly walk or bike.”

One tip for identifying faith-based groups that are more likely to collaborate with a residents group: “The women pastors are more concerned about safety,” says Maxine Mickens. “They’re more likely to get their members involved in safety patrols.” For example, the church that contributes nine men to the Northend Neighborhood Patrol has a woman pastor.

One caution regarding working with religious groups comes from Lisa Johanon of Central Detroit Christian CDC, who has collaborated with a great many of them. “With faith-based organizations, sometimes they want to make themselves feel good – they tend to want to do something to the community, not with the community.”

The role of funders in smart collaboration

These grassroots leaders appreciate that many funders encourage large organizations to collaborate and share resources with them. “Funders have insisted on collaboration, and that

has helped provide impetus to work together,” says Aswan Almakary, who leads a grassroots project affiliated with a large organization.

However, as a small organization, getting respect from funders can be difficult. “It’s kind of weird because funders want you to hire people – they don’t think you’re serious if you don’t have paid staff,” says Jerry Ann Hebron. Accordingly, this year, Oakland Avenue Community Garden and Greenhouse Cooperative is hiring a seasonal garden assistant (one of the co-op members will be paid for 15 hours per week, though they’ll spend more time than that in the garden), and also a part-time bookkeeper.

These leaders believe that funders could do more to ensure that grassroots organizations get a fair share of collaborative funding streams, commensurate with what they contribute to the success of collaborative efforts. “The roles of small nonprofits need to be looked at on a different level,” says Gwen Britt. “Funders need to understand our financial struggles. Yes, we are community volunteers, but we work and we work hard on behalf of our children, and it takes time, research and resources to run quality programs. I don’t think we should be penalized financially because we care and want to make a difference in the lives of our children.”

“Funders and large organizations with resources that want to partner with and leverage the strengths of small, grassroots organizations should offer funds to support the smaller organizations’ work,” Kim Newberry says. “Too often, smaller organizations get overlooked or discounted when funding decisions are being made. Small organizations would love to receive more funding, so that they could pay their volunteers and part-time staff members for more of the hours they are already contributing.”



Kids in the Developing KIDS program attend a career day at Don Bosco Hall.

In closing

Grassroots groups are encouraged, even pressured by many funders, policy makers, trainers and consultants to be active collaborators. Yet as small, fragile organizations, poorly funded and little respected in the worlds of professional philanthropy and social policy, they must be careful in collaboration. Particularly when considering collaboration with larger, well-established organizations, they must look out that the partnership doesn't mean "one becomes the rider and the other becomes the horse," in Erik Howard's memorable phrase. Grassroots organizations have much at risk, and little margin for error. How can they collaborate wisely, so that organizational missions and community conditions truly benefit?

Despite the risks and challenges involved, there is a growing network of smart collaborators within the neighborhoods of Detroit where Community Connections has been working for the past seven years. This report has shared some of their hard-earned wisdom on effective grassroots collaboration. We hope that it is useful – to other grassroots leaders; to larger organizations that share the social ecology of communities with these vital grassroots groups and who can also gain from wisely collaborating in that context; and to the funders, intermediaries and policy makers that want to become more effective at nurturing youth development and community improvement in hard-pressed neighborhoods.



Appendices

Contributor profiles



Aswan Almaktary is a policy and civic engagement specialist who started her community work in 1998 with girls' programs in Hamtramck. As an ACCESS staff member since 2000 she has worked on family, youth and community projects in Chadsey/Condon, Southwest Detroit, Hamtramck and Dearborn. As coordinator for ACCESS's JIRAN (Join In to Revitalize Arab American Neighborhoods) project she has guided many multicultural collaborations including the four year JIRAN Youth Dialogue. Under her JIRAN leadership, youth are incited to seek community service opportunities, leadership, youth training, and job opportunities with local organizations and Arab community families are connected to neighborhood services. Aswan also serves on many committees and boards in Southwest Detroit.



Dr. Conja Wright is an advocate for Detroit youth and families. She uses her position as librarian, including at the Detroit Public Library Redford branch since 2006, as a vehicle to empower families and communities. Recognizing the library as a hub and nerve center for youth and families, Conja cultivates partnerships with private and community groups and enterprises to expand activities and opportunities for residents. Her passion and gift for story telling makes her a magnet for children and families in transition. Dr. Wright has channeled her observations as a community advocate and story teller into video production and filmmaking. She has written and produced films that educate about the challenges faced by communities and champion the spirit of determination and resilience of residents seized by poverty and disenfranchisement. Dr. Wright attended Wayne State University and the University of Phoenix. She remains in a constant state of learning and creating. Her life partner, Michael is a partner and motivator in her endeavors in every sense of the word.



Erik Howard is a photographer and co-founder of Expressions and Young Nation in Southwest Detroit. He combines his passion for youth and community development with his love of photography. Using activities such as lowriding, street art, and media as mentoring tools, Erik has been able to reach out to people in the community of Southwest Detroit. Building on themes originated at home he has been able to study and document ways people are using their passions to meet their community needs in cities across the United States and Canada as well as in Mexico and Europe.



Gwendolyn Britt, program director of Education One, CDC, is a business professional and educator. Her desire to advocate for youth began in 2005 when she was assigned to oversee an educational ministry for children in her church, Truth Christian Assembly. In 2006, she started Education One to reach academic underachievers outside of the church as well. Education One collaborates with schools, libraries, and community initiatives, and sponsors its own programs. Mrs. Britt also served as parent group chairperson for Bethune Academy for three years. She works with parents and community leaders toward the goal of creating an improved environment for learning.



Halima Cassells is a multi-media artist, avid gardener and community organizer. After graduating from Howard University, she worked in New York facilitating community murals until returning to her hometown, Detroit, to found the Detroit Mural Factory and Gardens. Halima currently serves as outreach coordinator for ArtsCorpsDetroit, vice-president of the Oakland Avenue Artists Coalition, helps teach Art as a Social Practice at Wayne State University, and is a freelance curator. She belongs to several arts organizations and is aligned with many youth organizations throughout Detroit. She has experience both in facilitating arts and gardening projects with residents and youth, and in planning projects that are facilitated by other artists.



Jerry Ann Hebron is a lifelong Detroit resident, educated in Detroit public schools and Wayne State University. She is married with 4 children and 9 grandchildren. Jerry Ann worked for 30 years as a court administrator, retiring in 2002, and then was a real estate broker until 2007 when she changed directions and became an activist in the Northend community. She worships at a Northend church and is Executive Director of the Northend Christian Community Development Corporation, which focuses on youth and economic development. In 2008 she started working with residents to develop the concept of a community garden on vacant land next to her church. Today the group farms on 2 acres including a greenhouse.



Kiddada Green works tirelessly to increase breastfeeding rates for African Americans. The founder and executive director of Black Mothers Breast Feeding Association and co-founder of Black Breastfeeding Week, she is committed to supporting families, and training public health workers on cultural competence in breastfeeding support. Kiddada serves on several local and national advisory groups, has led workshops in multiple states, and has published articles in *Breastfeeding Medicine*. She also is co-treasurer of her child's PTA. She holds degrees from Michigan State University and Oakland University, and is a proud and devoted wife, mother and educator.



Kimberly Newberry is a native Detroiter. She was educated in Detroit public schools and graduated with a bachelor's degree from Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio. She also studied on the graduate level at Wayne State and Central Michigan Universities. She has held key leadership positions within various organizations and currently serves as the founder, president, and chief executive officer of Developing Kingdoms In Different Stages (Developing K.I.D.S). Her drive to begin and build a community based organization to address the needs of youth enrolled in struggling schools and economically-challenged communities grew out of her own experiences.



Lisa Johanon has done non-profit work for 33 years, first in Chicago and since 1986 in Detroit. In 1994 she co-founded Central Detroit Christian Community Development Corporation, where she is now the executive director. CDC, with 23 staff, coordinates and implements educational programs, employment training, and economic development including creation of a healthy soul food restaurant, Café Sonshine, a produce market and truck called Peaches & Greens, and five other businesses. Lisa has a B.A. from Wheaton College and a J.D. from John Marshall Law School. Married for 31 years, she and her husband Dan have two children born to them and many others as well. They live where they serve-- central Detroit.



Lisa Leverette hails from Detroit. She has a B.S. in psychology from Michigan State University and an M.A. in Applied Social Science from Eastern Michigan University. Lisa has worked with many populations over the years in positions including therapist, research associate, youth outreach coordinator, social work supervisor and program director. She has worked throughout Detroit, cultivating alliances and working on behalf of children and families for over 20 years. Lisa is the liaison for her community association and has served on the boards of various community development groups in the Detroit, national and international community. Miss Leverette has coordinated and managed the Community Connections Grant Program, the grassroots grant making component of the Good Neighborhood program, a resident led community change initiative, for over eight years. The program provides outreach and technical assistance to community groups working with youth as a civic engagement and leadership development strategy. Lisa facilitates the resident review panel and provides overall program oversight and development. She views her position as a natural extension of being an involved resident and connector in Detroit communities.



Lisa Luevanos captures the history, culture, and daily interactions of the beautiful diverse communities of Metropolitan Detroit in vivid photographic images. Born and raised in Southwest Detroit, home to the area's Latino community, Lisa was introduced to photography by her mother. She cultivated her artistry at Crockett Vocational Technical School and Casa de Unidad (a community based arts and culture organization in Southwest Detroit), and earned her BFA at the Center of Creative Studies. After years as a Ford Motor Company photographer, she is now a freelance photographer, arts educator, and a member of CLAVE, Community of Latino Artists, Visionaries and Educators of Southwest Detroit, which organizes Latino arts and culture workshops with people of all ages.



Mary A. Luevanos is a lifelong resident of Southwest Detroit, a visual artist and storyteller. She credits her upbringing, her ancestors and her culture with shaping her life. Her Mexican immigrant grandfather was a storyteller, her grandmother a singer, poet and artist, and her father was an Aztec percussionist. Mary has long been active in community arts, youth and civic networks. She has served many years on the Community Connections Changemakers panel. One of her proudest honors is having a studio named for her at The Alley Project Gallery in Southwest Detroit, in recognition of her art work with neighborhood youth.



Maxine Mickens is a retired school teacher. She is an advocate of economic and personal financial planning, and a volunteer teacher for Detroit's Carter Methodist Church. She created a summer course entitled *Reality Economics* for young adults 18-30. She is the publisher of a bi-monthly neighborhood information/safety newsletter, the *West Grand Boulevard News*. Maxine maintains relationships with locally elected officials to keep abreast of policies that help to improve the quality of life for residents.



Patricia Dockery is the executive director for Stafford House, Inc. She is well recognized throughout Detroit for her work as a community organizer and non-profit consultant. Patricia is a native Detroiter with deep roots in the North End community where much of her charitable work is focused. She is an attorney who has worked extensively with youth in various settings including the criminal justice system, Detroit Public Schools as a hearing officer, Executive Director with Skillman Foundation Good Neighborhoods, and consultant with more than 30 community organizations. She is a graduate of Michigan State University and University of Detroit School of Law.



Phillis Hicks Judkins has lived in Detroit for 66 years. She enjoys working with youth and started a Boy Scout group in 1970. Educated in business and accounting, Phillis taught math at Biddle Elementary and worked for several corporations but says her current position, volunteer organizer in her neighborhood, working for the safety of the community, is her favorite. Phillis organizes and leads the radio patrol and beautification efforts in her community, served on the neighborhood governance board and is an overall connector bringing others together to improve conditions for youth, seniors and families. She started as a block captain, which grew into the Northend Neighborhood Patrol and lawn care service. A safe house that houses residents in transition followed. Residents care for the house and work as volunteers on the Neighborhood Patrol. Mrs. Judkins also organized Ten Minute People, in which seniors act as the eyes and ears of the community 10 minutes a day observing and reporting irregularities. 10 minutes a day observing and reporting irregularities.



Riet Schumack moved to the Brightmoor neighborhood with her husband and six children, convinced that to be effective in ministry, one should live where one ministers. With a passion for green space and children she started Brightmoor Youth Garden in 2008, a market garden for local children. That led to forming Neighbors Building Brightmoor, a grassroots organization whose mission is to encourage, empower and help each other to make Brightmoor a good place for us and our children. Riet and her neighbors have boarded up and put murals on over 125 houses, operate over 25 gardens, run art and teen programs and administer over 10,000 volunteer hours per year.



Sheila Jackson-Carter is a longtime advocate from Southwest Detroit. She lives and works in Mexicantown where she says the Latino community has adopted her and she has adopted them. She volunteers on several boards including the Congress of Communities, Community Connections Changemakers panel, Councilwoman Jones' Apprentice Training Task Force and as a stakeholder for LA SED. Sheila graduated from Detroit's Cooley High School and Wayne County Community College. She recently completed the University of Michigan's Leadership Training program. She worked as a census worker, real estate broker, property manager, job developer, ran her own business, and is currently employed as a supervisor for National Labor Service. Ms. Jackson-Carter was born in White Hall Alabama, a birthplace of the civil rights movement. She has one son, Jimmy. Sheila credits her activist and humanist spirit to her mother, who taught her strength and forgiveness.

Inquiry framework

Community Connections Learning Inquiry 2013:

Smart Collaboration at the Grassroots Level

Framework/Interview Guide

for probing the experience of grantee groups recognized as skilled collaborators

Inquiry goal: Capture and share the lessons and stories that can help improve and increase collaborative practice among Community Connections grantees and other stakeholders.

- I. **Introduction:** Tell a bit about yourself, your organization, your work in the community.
 - A. What do you do – what’s your focus, your mission, your passion?
 - B. How long have you been at it? What got you into the community work you do?
 - C. What’s your history or involvement, briefly, with Community Connections?
(E.g. grants received for certain projects, contact with Lisa, service on panel, other training/ development/networking)
- II. Tell a story of when collaboration was especially **valuable** in your work
 - A. Why do you appreciate this particular collaboration? What makes it valuable to you?
 - B. How and when did the collaboration come about? How did it get started?
(Who initiated the collaboration? How did those initial conversations become possible? Were any other people involved or necessary to help with introductions or to help move the conversation about collaboration along?)
 - C. Who were you collaborating with?
(Listen/probe for: what kind of organization/group/individual; how are the partners alike, how are they different from each other – including size, strength, wealth, culture, gender, citizen and professional credentials, role in community, etc. Were these “peas in a pod”, or “strange bedfellows”?)
 - D. What was the nature of your collaboration?
 1. What was your goal?
 2. What roles did you each play, what contributions did you each make?
(Listen/probe for: co-creative, reciprocal dynamics vs. some are in charge and others just help out or fill specific roles as asked. Listen for the range of valued partner roles and contributions.)
 - E. How did the collaboration evolve over time?
 1. What were the milestones, or stages, or critical incidents along the way that were important to this being a valuable collaboration for you?
 2. What were the challenges, or tensions, in the collaboration? What did you learn about how to deal with these?
 - F. What do you think can be learned from this good experience? What are the lessons for you?

- G. What were the factors in the neighborhood or city environment, either good or bad, that made this collaborative experience easier or harder?
- III. Tell a story of a time when you had a **negative** experience with collaboration, or attempted collaboration
 - A. What made it a negative experience?
 - B. How did this one get started?
 - C. Who was it with?
 - D. What was the nature of this (attempted) collaboration?
 - E. How did it evolve over time?
 - 1. Any bright spots along the way?
 - 2. When, where, why did it go bad?
 - F. What do you think can be learned from this bad experience? What are the lessons for you?
 - G. What factors in the neighborhood or city environment, either good or bad, made this collaborative experience easier or harder?
- IV. Do you have **additional good experiences, or bad experiences, to share**? Please feel free to tell me about other memorable experiences you've had in trying to work collaboratively (including the role of neighborhood or city environment factors).
- V. What **advice would you offer to other grassroots groups and projects** that want to get smarter at collaboration?
 - A. How casual contacts can evolve into valuable, enjoyable collaborations
 - B. When to look for partners
 - C. What good partners look like, and how to size up possible partners
 - D. Guidelines and practices that are valuable for helping collaboration go well
 - 1. What to do
 - 2. What not to do
 - 3. Common challenges in collaboration – and tips for dealing with these
- VI. What **advice would you give to larger agencies and institutions** that want to collaborate well with grassroots groups and leaders?

Credits

This report was produced by Touchstone Center for Collaborative Inquiry with support from Prevention Network, which operates the Community Connections resident grants program, and Community Connections funders the Skillman Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The inquiry was conducted collaboratively with Community Connections staff and Changemaker resident panelists. Responsibility for the contents of this report rests solely with Touchstone Center for Collaborative Inquiry.

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